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[Offshore unit draws lawmaker's scrutiny](#)

By Jennifer A. Dlouhy

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A top congressional Republican wants to know more about a new Interior Department team dedicated to rooting out wrongdoing by companies drilling offshore and the government officials who police them.

The man behind the push, Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Wash., heads the House Natural Resources Committee and is a frequent critic of the Obama administration's management of offshore drilling.

His target is the Investigations and Review Unit. Michael Bromwich, former director of the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, set up the unit after the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill as part of a broader reorganization of the government agencies that oversee offshore drilling.

At the time, Bromwich said he envisioned the unit would be "an internal compliance and investigations team that can act quickly and report directly to me."

Three years later, Hastings said, it's still unclear exactly how the team works and what its powers are.

In a letter to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, Hastings said questions remain about whether the unit operates as a law enforcement entity, and whether it has sufficient oversight by the Interior Department and Congress.

"None of the internal department policies and orders related to the establishment of the IRU shed light on whether these employees are serving in a law enforcement capacity, how they are to interact with witnesses or collect evidence, and what technical expertise they possess," Hastings wrote.

It also is unclear how many people work for the unit, their backgrounds and expertise, and whether their work duplicates that of other Interior Department programs and workers, Hastings said.

For instance, he said, since the unit has been deployed to help with investigations of offshore facilities and at least one accident in the Gulf, the team's work could overlap with the missions of other bureau inspectors.

Some in the offshore drilling industry fear that if unchecked, the unit could hamper coastal energy development. In an opinion piece last November, Hercules Offshore Vice President Jim Noe urged care in deploying the new team "to ensure that safe and responsible offshore production" can continue.

The Obama administration last year sought \$5.8 million to pay for 20 new employees in the unit, beyond spending already dedicated to the offshore inspections at the safety bureau.

Bromwich had said it would be staffed with prosecutors, investigators and scientists who would investigate allegations of misconduct and conflicts of interest against internal bureau employees as well as industry officials.

A 2012 job description said the special investigator positions require Top Secret clearance, as well as experience conducting on-site inquiries and collecting evidence. A bureau website describes the group as a "team of professionals with law enforcement backgrounds or technical expertise."

Hastings asked Salazar to describe the Interior Department's management of the unit, including training and credentialing. Interior Department policies require its law enforcement officers to undergo background checks and get specialized training.

He also asked Salazar whether he has authorized employees to carry firearms, the rationale for those decisions and whether employees have had handgun training.

Earlier this year, Hastings said he would step up congressional oversight of the administration's management of energy development on federal lands and waters.

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